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COLUMBUS: THE GIBRALTAR OF THE WEST

Lonnie E. Maness, Ph.D.

The political situation in the slave border state of Kentucky was complex. After the election of Abraham Lincoln as President, South Carolina left the Union, an act that triggered the secession movement. By February 1, 1861, all of the states of the deep South had left the Union and would soon form the Confederate States of America. But Kentucky would not be stampeded in this direction. Opinion was divided in this blue-grass country where both Lincoln and Jefferson Davis were born. Some members of the state legislature were secessionists. Certain officers of the state militia, like its commander Simon Bolivar Buckner, and most of the militiamen, were for secession. In short, Confederate sympathizers were plentiful throughout the state, as were Union sympathizers.

Therefore, as the secession movement gained momentum, Kentucky became more and more hesitant about taking sides. Kentucky wanted to play the role of peacemaker. Then came the firing on Fort Sumter and Lincoln's call for volunteers from the states still in the Union. Governor Beriah Magoffin, like Governor Isham G. Harris of Tennessee, refused to honor the call for troops. The Kentucky legislature endorsed the governor's stand by resolving "that this state and the citizens thereof should take no part in the civil war now waged, except as mediators and friends to the belligerent parties and that Kentucky should, during the contest, occupy the position of strict neutrality." Magoffin issued a proclamation of neutrality, and before the legislature adjourned it also resolved that Kentucky, though neutral, would not secede from the Union.¹

This policy of neutrality remained in effect from late May until September 1861, with both the United States and the Confederacy agreeing to respect Kentucky's neutrality. Why? It was because both sides hoped that this would give them easy access to Kentucky and eventually cause the blue-grass state to come over to their side.

In June 1861 the people of Tennessee voted to leave the Union, the vote being 108,511 to 47,338. The volunteer state was soon part of the Confederacy.² In late July Tennessee's troops, commanded by General Gideon J. Pillow, were transferred to Confederate command, with General Leonidas Polk being placed in command. His headquarters were at Memphis, Tennessee. Polk continued to build up the defenses along the Mississippi River that were begun by Pillow. Work on Fort Pillow and Island #10 was pushed, and within about one month these positions were fortified. General Charles Clark was ordered from Corinth, Mississippi, with two regiments to Union City, Tennessee. Polk was of the opinion that Kentucky's sham neutrality would not last very much longer; he wanted to be in a position to seize and fortify Columbus, Kentucky, a very strong position from which the Mississippi River could be more easily defended. Columbus was also the northern terminus of the Mobile and Ohio Railroad. It was indeed

of great strategic importance, and Polk was determined on seizing it "at all hazards" when the opportune moment arrived.³

By late August Polk was very concerned about Columbus because of the threatening movement of Federal troops in that area. On September 1, Federal General Robert Anderson moved his headquarters from Cincinnati, Ohio, to Louisville, Kentucky. William Nelson was commissioned a brigadier general and was authorized to organize troops at Maysville, Kentucky, that would operate in eastern Kentucky. General George H. Thomas was placed in command of the troops at Camp Dick Robinson. Then General John C. Fremont told General Ulysses S. Grant that he intended to occupy Columbus; in fact, on September 2 Grant, from Cairo, Illinois, dispatched a land and naval force against Belmont, Missouri, which was just across the river from Columbus. This move threatened Columbus, and Polk believed this was sufficient provocation for him to seize Columbus. Accordingly, on September 3 he ordered General Clark to move up from Union City, Tennessee, and seize Columbus. Clark completed this task within twenty-four hours. Polk's quick action prevented Grant from seizing this strategic location by one day. However, Grant now seized Paducah, Kentucky. Thus, both the Confederate and the Union violated the neutrality of Kentucky. Polk justified his actions on the basis of military necessity, and President Davis upheld Polk's actions.⁴ Polk soon had Columbus so well fortified that it became known as the "Gibraltar of the West."

Governor Magoffin wanted the state legislature to protest to both the Confederacy and the United States. The governor wanted them both out of Kentucky. Instead the legislature, under the influence of its pro-Unionist majority, passed a law making enlistment in the Confederate Army a misdemeanor. It also passed a resolution calling upon the Confederate troops to get out of Kentucky. No mention was made of Union forces doing the same. General Polk told Governor Magoffin and the legislature that he would withdraw his troops provided the Federals would do likewise. However, nothing came of this offer, and Polk remained in Columbus.⁵ Shortly Kentucky formally cast its lot with the Union.

By this time General Albert Sidney Johnston had been made commander of the Western Department with discretion to withdraw from Kentucky if he felt it necessary. After arriving in Nashville, Johnston decided that Columbus must be held and southern Kentucky occupied. Soon he had established a defensive line running from Cumberland Gap in eastern Kentucky through Bowling Green to Columbus and began calling for reinforcements to man this line.⁶

As this line of defense was being strengthened there was continuous fighting and skirmishing along its entire length. The first battle of any real consequence that was fought on Johnston's front was the Battle of Belmont, Missouri, on November 7, 1861. When this battle was fought Polk had under his command twenty-one regiments of infantry, eight field batteries, one battery of siege guns, two battalions, and six unattached companies of cavalry, all divided into three divisions, commanded respectively

by Generals Pillow and Cheatham and Colonel John S. Bowen. The latter was stationed at Camp Beauregard, located fifteen miles from Columbus. The Thirteenth Arkansas, commanded by Colonel J.C. Tappan, Beltzhoover's Louisiana battery of six guns, and Colonel J.H. Miller's two troops of cavalry from the Mississippi battalion were stationed across the river at Belmont.⁷

Though Polk won the race for Columbus, Grant by no means was willing to admit that the Confederates were now in permanent possession of that strategic location. Shortly after occupying Paducah, Grant wrote his commanding general, John C. Fremont, suggesting that "if a demonstration was made from Paducah towards Union City, supported by...gunboats, and a force moving upon Belmont, the enemy would be forced to leave Columbus."⁸ Fremont made no reply to this, but when he began offensive operations, marching against the victors of Wilson's Creek, he had his adjutant order Grant to feint against Polk to prevent him from sending reinforcements to General Sterling Price in Missouri. In doing this Grant was to make a demonstration along both sides of the Mississippi, keeping his troops "constantly moving back and forward...without, however, attacking the enemy." Grant did as ordered. However, on November 5 Grant was informed that Polk was sending reinforcements to aid Price, that his feinting had not worked. Thus, Grant was ordered to make a demonstration against Columbus itself.⁹

Accordingly, on November 6, Grant loaded five infantry regiments, supported by two cavalry troops and a six gun battery, onto four transports--3,114 men--and steamed down the Mississippi, protected by the gunboats *Tyler* and *Lexington*. At the same time General Charles F. Smith left Paducah with 2,000 men and marched in the direction of Columbus. Though Grant had orders to only demonstrate and not actually attack, he did attack at Belmont. Clearly he had made up his mind to attack and take Belmont at the time he left Cairo. Otherwise, why should he have taken along over 3,100 men? The *Tyler* and *Lexington* could have made a sufficient demonstration by shelling Columbus and Belmont. Grant gave his intention away when he sent an order to Colonel R.J. Oglesby, who commanded an Illinois regiment in northeast Arkansas, which commanded Oglesby to move toward New Madrid, Missouri, and "communicate with me at Belmont."¹⁰

Nine miles below Cairo, tied up for the night against the eastern bank, Grant received a report that Polk had ordered a strong column to cut off and destroy the troops Grant had sent to do the same thing to General Jeff Thompson. This message arrived at two o'clock in the morning, and within the hour this news had reinforced Grant in his determination to launch a direct, all-out attack on Belmont where the enemy column was reported to be assembling. At dawn the downstream approach got under way, the troops experiencing the qualms and elation of undergoing their first baptism of fire. Their emotions perhaps would have been less mixed, though probably no less violent, if they had known that none of the conditions their com-

mander assumed existed at or near Columbus were true. Polk had no intention of reinforcing Price, nor was he preparing a column to bag the force that supposed itself to be pursuing Thompson because Thompson had retired from the field by this date. In any event Grant's men disembarked from their transports at eight o'clock on the morning of November 7, some three miles from Belmont. Their landing was concealed by a skirt of timber. While the gunboats continued downstream to engage the batteries on the Columbus bluff, the men in blue formed a line of battle and marched southward toward Belmont, skirmishers out. Presently, with the booming of the guns of the naval engagement coming across the water from their left, the Union men came under heavy musket fire from their front.¹¹

By this time Polk had been alerted to the Union presence across the river and had sent reinforcements to the Belmont garrison--some four regiments under the command of Brigadier General Gideon J. Pillow, a graduate of West Point and a Mexican War veteran. After landing at Belmont, Pillow moved his men northward and took position in the path of Grant's line of march. The opposing forces were about equal. The fighting began at about 10:30 in the morning and was hard. However, the Federals had the initiative, and they also had Grant, who was something rare.¹²

Grant had left five companies near the transports as a rear guard, and with the rest of his command he pushed relentlessly forward. The Confederates gave ground slowly and stubbornly, but after some two hours of fighting Pillow's men broke and ran for the rear. They found protection from the Federal bullets behind the river embankment. As more Confederate reinforcements arrived from Columbus these disheartened men shouted for them not to land, that they were whipped.¹³

These disheartened troops spoke too soon because the battle was not over. Grant's men believed they had won, and so they stopped to loot the Confederate camp. With their men out of the line of fire, the artillerists from Columbus brought their guns to bear on the captured campsite. Also, the reinforcements--three regiments led by Brigadier General B.F. Cheatham--formed a line of battle and prepared to attack. Pillow's men were beginning to take heart and began reforming their lines. Other Confederate reinforcements were also being put ashore further north between Grant and his transports. Polk now arrived to lead the attack on Grant's force. In the meantime Grant ordered the campsite set afire to stop the looting and began to reassemble his troops. Shortly an aide approached and told Grant that the Union force was surrounded. Grant responded by stating that they would have to cut their way out. However, by now there were some 5,000 Confederate troops on the field so "cutting his way out" was going to be difficult.¹⁴

Difficult though it was, that is exactly what Grant did. However, he had to abandon most of his captured material which included one thousand rifles, four cannon, and many of the wounded that were not able to walk. One Union regiment was cut off in the retreat and had to be marched further

upstream to be picked up by the transports. Except for this regiment, Grant was the last man to go aboard the final transport.¹⁵

The captain of the last transport had already shoved off, but he looked back on shore and recognized Grant on his horse and ran a gangplank back to the bank for him. General Polk also observed this lone horseman, but he did not recognize Grant. The bishop-general and some of his staff were in a nearby woods which had screened the debarkation. Seeing this lone horseman, Polk stated to his staff, "There is a Yankee; you may try your marksmanship on him if you wish." However, no one did. In the fighting Grant had already had one horse shot from under him. He had chosen his second mount well. The horse, Grant stated, seemed to understand the situation and "put its forefeet over the lip of the bank, tucked its hind legs under its rump, and without hesitation or urging, slid down the incline and trotted up the gangplank" and on board the transport.¹⁶

The Battle of Belmont was now over, with Grant's men driven from the field of battle. The Confederates were victorious even though the casualties were about even on both sides. The Union loss was 120 killed, 383 wounded, and 104 missing or captured. The Confederate loss was 105 killed, 419 wounded, and 117 missing. In his dispatches Grant stated: "The victory is complete." However, the *Chicago Tribune* was of the opinion that "Federal troops have suffered a bad defeat." In another editorial the editor stated: "It may be said of these victims, they have fallen, and to what end?"¹⁷

It was at this time that Grant began to be referred to as the butcher. It is true that this was no victory because no tactical advantage had been won. Yet there was a positive side of the picture. Grant had moved in relatively bad weather; he kept his head when the tide of battle turned against him, and he extricated his men from a very bad situation. They were now battle-tested veterans with an esprit de corps. They would not listen to any talk of Grant being a butcher. After all, they had watched him lead them into battle, and some had seen his horse shot from under him. Many of these men had also witnessed Grant riding his horse up the gangplank, the last man to leave the field of battle."¹⁸

The Confederates were left in control of Belmont, and they correctly celebrated this engagement as a victory. It might be added that Grant owed his escape to the fact that General Charles F. Smith and his 2,000 men were moving on Columbus from Paducah. Polk simply could not believe the main effort was being made across the river at Belmont. He thought Columbus was the prime target, and thus Polk did not send as many reinforcements to Belmont as he otherwise could have.

Out of the Battle of Belmont grew several incidents. While the battle was in progress a 128-pounder rifled gun was charged while hot. Since there was no further opportunity to fire the gun, it was allowed to cool and remain charged for four days. When it was fired its magazine exploded. Several persons were killed and wounded, including General Polk who was

among those wounded.¹⁹ On November 12, Polk wrote a letter to his wife in which he explained that he and several of his officers had spent most of that day in a boat on the river discussing an exchange of prisoners with Colonel N.B. Buford of the 27th Illinois Regiment and his officers. Polk described Buford as "most devotedly my friend—a true Christian, a true soldier, and a gentleman every inch of him." After the exchange of prisoners was completed Polk still had some prisoners left. In parting Polk went with Colonel Buford nearly to Cairo, and Buford wanted Polk to spend the night with him at Cairo. "So you see," Polk wrote his wife, "how much we have done on this line toward ameliorating the severities of this unfortunate and wretched state of things."²⁰

In another letter to Mrs. Polk that was dated November 15, Polk pointed out that he had been on the river on two more occasions to meet flags of truce, once to meet General Grant and the other time to meet Buford. They talked about the further exchange of prisoners, and Grant was very grave. However, Polk told his wife that he "succeeded in getting a smile out of" Grant. The two generals also discussed the principles on how the war should be conducted. Grant agreed with Polk in denouncing all "barbarity, vandalism, plundering, and all that." Polk was favorably impressed by Grant. During one of the conferences with Grant an incident occurred that gave all present a great deal of amusement. The business at hand finished, the Union and Confederate officers adjourned to eat a luncheon which Polk had provided. When the meal was finished Colonel Buford raised his glass and proposed a toast to "George Washington, the Father of his country." And Bishop-General Polk quickly added: "And the first Rebel!" The Federal officers gracefully drank to the amended toast. Sometime later General Cheatham engaged Grant in a discussion of horse racing, a subject both loved. After the conversation had gone on for some time Cheatham, declaring that the war was a troublesome affair, proposed that it should be terminated by a horse race on the Missouri shore. Laughingly, Grant responded that "he wished it might be so."²¹

Belmont was Grant's Civil War baptism of fire. Grant discovered that the fortifications at Columbus were very strong and almost unassailable. Thus, for the next several months he made no determined effort to take Columbus from the Confederates. In fact it was only after the fortress had been outflanked by the capture of Forts Henry and Donelson that the Union was able to take it and then only because Polk was ordered to withdraw to a line further south.

In the meantime, both before and after the action at Belmont, the Columbus fortifications were strengthened. The Confederates realized the strategic importance of the fortress. It could blockade the Mississippi River, a vital highway the Federals could use for the invasion of the South. The North, in accordance with the Anaconda plan, wanted to seize control of the entire Mississippi River, split the Confederacy in two, and slowly squeeze the life out of the Confederacy.

Ultimately no less than 140 guns were mounted at Columbus, and at peak strength the garrison stood at some 17,000 men. Also, to aid the blockade, the idea was put forth of blockading the river by a giant iron chain that would stretch from shore to shore. The chain was to have enough slack in it so that friendly vessels could be allowed to pass. The slack would be taken up to stop the passage of hostile ships. Some credit this idea to General Pillow who was initially in charge at Columbus. Others say that it was Polk who came up with the idea. In any case, the necessary chain was obtained from some naval yard and forwarded to Columbus. The chain was most impressive, being made up of fifteen pound links and attached to a sixteen foot sea anchor. Laying the chain across the river, which was over one half mile wide, was no small task.²²

Finally the task was completed. Keeping a close watch over the river and chain were 140 artillery pieces which were mounted at four elevations-- 40, 85, 97, and 120 feet, the batteries being protected by massive earthworks from naval gunfire from the river. Precautions were also taken to guard against attack from the land side. Trenches, redoubts, and abatis were constructed. Then one element in this defense set-up did not work. The chain proved to be of no use whatsoever. Because of its massive weight when raised high enough to obstruct traffic, the chain broke close to the eastern bank.²³

Without the chain the fortifications were still exceedingly strong. In fact they were so strong and the fort so well garrisoned that Grant never launched a frontal attack against it. Instead, Grant had a better idea, to outflank the fortress and make its continued defense next to impossible. This was accomplished in February 1862 when Grant and Flag Officer Andrew H. Foote moved against and captured Fort Henry on the Tennessee River and Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River. This caused Generals Albert Sidney Johnston and Pierre G.T. Beauregard to order the evacuation of Columbus, thus bringing to an end the "Gibraltar of the West."²⁴

The decision to completely abandon Columbus was taken against Polk's wishes. However, the decision having been made, it was Polk's unwelcome task of dismantling the Columbus fortifications and seeing to it that all the guns, food, war supplies, and troops were moved to other positions in West Tennessee and along the Mississippi River. On March 2, Polk and the cavalry were the last to leave Columbus, the quarters and other buildings being burned as they left. Polk was so skillful in carrying out his orders that the enemy was in complete ignorance of what he was doing. All of the guns, food, and other supplies were moved to safety. Seven thousand of the troops were sent to New Madrid, Missouri and Island Number 10. The other 10,000 men of the garrison were withdrawn to Humboldt, Tennessee. Only a few shot and gun-carriages and two 32-pounders, in a remote outwork, were left behind, along with three or four small caronades.²⁵

A somewhat different story was presented in the report the Brigadier General George W. Cullum made to Major General Henry W. Halleck.

Thanks to the brilliant strategy of the Forts Henry, Heiman, and Donelson campaigns, Cullum stated, "Columbus, the Gibraltar of the West, is ours, and Kentucky is free." The enemy's center was pierced, rendering Columbus isolated and turned. This, Cullum stated, compelled the Confederacy to evacuate not only Columbus but the stronghold of Bowling Green, Kentucky. The Federal forces under Cullum arrived at Columbus by riverboat on the morning of March 4 only to find that a small number of Union troops were already in possession of the fortress. Cullum stated that Columbus must have been evacuated hastily because he found a "considerable quantity of ordnance and ordnance stores, a number of anchors, and the remnant of the chain which was once stretched over the river, and large supply of torpedoes remaining." A garrison of some 2,000 infantry and 400 cavalry was left at Columbus, and Cullum promised to further strengthen this force.²⁶

The Union occupation of Columbus would last until the end of the war, and Columbus would serve as a depot for supplying Union forces in the field. The Federal troops at Columbus would also be used to help occupy and control the pro-Confederate population of the area to the east, south, and north of Columbus. Undoubtedly, there was much guerrilla activity in the western part of Kentucky. Thus, the Union garrison at Columbus was kept busy with its many duties.

During General Nathan Bedford Forrest's second raid into West Tennessee and western Kentucky in March and April 1864, there was occasion for some very real excitement for the Columbus garrison. As part of the Forrest's command under Colonel W.L. Duckworth approached Union City, Tennessee, the Federal commander, Colonel Isaac R. Hawkins, was made aware that Forrest was approaching, probably with his entire command. Not being desirous of being captured again as he was by Forrest in December 1862, Hawkins took the precaution of telegraphing his superior officer, Brigadier General Mason Brayman, that Forrest would soon attack his position. Brayman, after confirming the danger and satisfying himself that Union City was the focal point of attack, ordered some 2,000 troops to the rescue from Cairo, Illinois.²⁷ These troops travelled by river to Columbus, disembarked, and then moved by train toward Union City. They were too late. When about six miles from Union City, Brayman learned that Hawkins had surrendered. The dispirited troops returned to Cairo.²⁸ Union City had fallen on March 24; two days later Forrest occupied Paducah, Kentucky, and attacked the Federal fort at that location.²⁹ These two events caused much excitement at Columbus. Many of the Union troops no doubt were speculating as to when their turn would come.

And come it did even though Columbus was in no danger of being captured. After Forrest reassembled his command at Jackson, Tennessee--a command that was now augmented by many recruits--with their captured horses and prisoners from Union City and Paducah, Forrest began to plan his next move. General A. Buford, whose troops were at Trenton, was ordered to move toward Paducah, Forrest having heard that the Federals now had more horses and supplies at that location. This movement was

also ordered as a diversion for the movement against Fort Pillow which Forrest was planning.³⁰ Buford was in the neighborhood of Columbus by April 12, the same day that Fort Pillow fell to Forrest's determined assault. Captain H.A. Tyler, with about 150 men, was detached to make a demonstration against Columbus while Buford with the rest of his command went on to Paducah.³¹

Captain Tyler threw a real scare into the Federals at Columbus. Arriving before daylight on April 13, he drove the Union pickets in on the various roads at Columbus. Tyler then marched his men several times across an open space that was in full view of the Federal garrison, creating the impression that there was a large body of Confederates present. Squads were sent out to the extreme left and right. Tyler's men also showed themselves at various other places. Tyler then sent in a flag of truce demanding the surrender of the Columbus garrison, signing General Buford's name to the note.³²

Colonel William Hudson Lawrence, the post commandant, received the demand for surrender, and while he was considering his reply he treated the two Confederate officers, Captains D.E. Myers and Jack Horn, to breakfast and cocktails. While this was going on Colonel Lawrence could be heard next door in the telegraph room. Captain Horn, knowing something about telegraphy, could make out parts of some of the messages being sent. He learned that Lawrence was of the opinion that General Buford, with his entire division, was before Columbus. Lawrence asked for reinforcements. That was what the Confederates wanted--to get their attention off Paducah and on to Columbus. After a very long time Colonel Lawrence gave Captain Myers his reply--his refusal to surrender. Myers and Horn were again blindfolded and escorted through the Union lines.³³

With the return of the flag of truce, Captain Tyler's small detachment remained outside of Columbus until late in the afternoon of April 13, neither attacking nor being attacked. By an all night march Tyler was able to rejoin Buford's command early in the morning of April 14, about three miles from Paducah. He joined in the successful attack on Paducah soon after daylight. Buford made off with about 150 excellent horses and mules that belonged to the United States Army, animals that Forrest badly needed for his command.³⁴

For the rest of the war Columbus continued to function as a base of supply for Union gunboats. Its garrison also helped in the occupation of that portion of western Kentucky.

In 1928 the Commonwealth of Kentucky created the Columbus-Belmont Battlefield State Park, with many of the trenches and redoubts being restored. The building that housed the hospital was converted into a museum in order to house many of the relics of this by-gone war, the most horrible of all wars the United States has ever fought in terms of American lives lost. The great anchor and chain that were later unearthed constitute the chief relics that are on display at the park.³⁵ But if visitors will use their

imagination, they can still see the 140 artillery pieces and soldiers in the trenches--the wherewithal that made Columbus the "Gibraltar of the West" in its heyday. Is it any wonder that Grant did not try taking this fortress by direct assault from the land approach?

Today the Columbus-Belmont Battlefield park is a majestic reminder of the horrible days of the Civil War. It is a beautiful park that many thousands of citizens have visited over the years, and relics of that late unpleasant phase of our history are still being unearthed by souvenir hunters with metal detectors outside the confines of the park. One such collector who has had considerable success is Fletcher Gattis of McConnell, Tennessee. He has a large collection of both Union and Confederate items. They include buttons, belt buckles, breastplates, boxplates, several hundred mini balls of all caliber, cannister shot, cannon balls that range in weight from four pounds to one hundred pounds, various company insignia, a sutler fifty cent piece, parts of pistols and rifles, and several bayonets.³⁶

Columbus, indeed, was a mighty fortress and Confederate stronghold. It is easy to speak of what might have been, but had General Johnston made his great stand at Fort Donelson instead of Shiloh the war in the west might have taken a different turn. In that case Columbus might have played an even more important role in the war.

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